

# LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE PEACEFULLY

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## **Communication: Concord or Conflict?**

There is a massive arid tantalising contradiction at the heart of communication theory. In theory, communication is supposed to be a process that unites people, bringing them together to form and maintain communities - be that of language, or interest, or belief and understanding, value or whatever.

In practice, communication is also a matter of personality for individuals and one of culture for societies. People respond to the world they live in, and seek to make sense of it. And, individuals and societies alike often find that their realities differ from one another. As a result (Carey, 1989:87), nowhere is more conflicted or more in need of political resolution than

*the site where painters paint, writers write, speakers speak, filmmakers film  
(and) broadcasters broadcast.*

The reason, Carey argues, is that reality is a scarce resource. Like any scarce resource, it is there to be struggled over, variously allocated and endowed with meaning.

*The fundamental form of power is the power to define.*

Conflict arises, not only over the "general determination of the real" but over "forms of thought, technique and social relations".

In this presentation, I want to look at how forms of thought (especially preconception), technique and social relations affect our constructions of reality, especially in the production of news, and how those factors become manifestly evident in the material that is produced. From those observations, I will then proceed to suggest ways in which news, especially on television, could be made less divisive and provocative.

## **Representations of Truth**

Eighty years ago in the USA, Walter Uppmann (1922) and John Dewey (1927) argued about the best metaphor for the truth of news. For Uppmann, it *was* visual, a comparison of "the world outside

with the pictures in our heads". For Dewey, it was verbal. The ear, he believed, was more active than the eye and more vitally connected with thought. Conversation, he insisted, had a vitality and strength lacking in the "fixed and frozen words" of written speech.

*Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is only partially informed and (only partially) formed until (its) meaning passes from mouth to mouth.*

(Dewey, 1927:217-219).

The epitome of democracy for the pragmatic idealist Dewey lay in that staple of early republican American polity, the town meeting. He believed devoutly in activity: not only in learning by doing but in being by doing. For him, as for the psychologist William James, his novelist brother Henry and several generations of screenwriters in Hollywood (Field, 1998:165), "character is determined by action". Uppmann's heresy was therefore twofold: he espoused a spectator theory of knowledge. Worse, according to Carey (1989:82), Dewey thought that Uppmann saw the public *as* a second-order spectator: a spectator of spectators. Written words and pictures were all too passive when compared with speech.

Journalism, at that time, consisted overwhelmingly of the daily reporting of events and issues for the press, occasionally illustrated by photographs and cartoons. Radio news reports were often translations, if not just readings, from newspapers. The live reporter filing by mobile telephone was a remote and distant dream, as was television. Today, not only in the USA but also worldwide, the situation has changed. The periodicity of journalism has changed in all its media forms. The daily cycles of print journalism have now become hourly for radio and television broadcasting and by the minute for on-line Internet services. The cultural functions of journalism have diversified. It is no longer (if it ever was) only a matter of informing the public. It now entertains. It also persuades. One of the central elements of communication is that speakers, writers and filmmakers intend their audiences, their readers and their viewers to accept and "understand" what they have done, which includes recognising their intention (Honderich 1995: 142-143). Dr Jamie Shea, the public relations director for NATO during the 1999 war in Kosovo, has lamented the difficulties of keeping the media interested in that conflict. His concern was that uninterested media were unlikely to interest their readers and listeners and viewers. Discussing these issues at a seminar in Helsinki last year, Shea observed:

*Modern conflicts are fought and won on television ... One of our weaknesses in NATO was that we were a newspaper service not a TV press service - we provided backgrounds, sophisticated arguments, (things that require) plenty of time because newspapers only appear the next day - the problem was that we didn't generate pictures ... pictures are what drives TV.*

(Shea, 2000)

It is sometimes said that, if the world was to end right now, we would find about it on radio, believe it when we saw it on television and understand it when it is was reported in tomorrows newspapers. By then, of course, it would be a bit late for understanding. Nevertheless, this aphorism, neatly expresses the partial nature of human perception - which has tantalized philosophers for more than two and a half thousand years. It is also a salutary reminder that, when people do come to converse about the news and make it meaningful, rightly or wrongly, in many countries and cultures they trust television more than they trust print or radio.

Three questions arise in the context of this conference:

1. are pictures and the written word really "fixed and frozen", as Dewey claimed, or are they capable of connecting with "vital and out-going thought"?
2. are words and sounds and pictures necessarily weapons of war, or can they contribute to peace and understanding? And
3. how can we learn to communicate peacefully?

In this paper, I argue in the affirmative that pictures and words are as capable as speech of connecting with vital and outgoing thought, that words and sounds and pictures can contribute as well as speech to peace and understanding, and that we can learn to communicate peacefully. That turns largely on what we mean by "peace" and "communication".

### Reporting or Provoking?

David Shukman, a television news reporter for BBC World has recalled what he calls

*That magnificent moment in Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" when there's a demonstration by black protestors in New York. The demonstration does not begin until the TV satellite truck arrives.*

(Shukman, 2000)



He claims to have had a similar experience, nearly 20 years ago, as a young reporter in Northern Ireland. He was sent to report on a "small riot - just a few rocks and petrol bombs and a few rubber bullets". When he and his cameraman got out of their car and approached the scene, "things got worse". Challenged by the police, they got back in their car. Then, however, a British commercial television crew and another from France arrived. The event erupted. Competition got the better of him and his crew.

*Suddenly we had an event that we felt obliged to cover ... and, when we got back to the studio, the editor was very pleased.*

(Shukman, 2000)

The problem, however, was that he did not cover the whole event. What he portrayed appeared to be "just" a riot, not a riot enflamed by the arrival of three television crews. He had zoomed in, metaphorically if not also physically, instead of zooming out to show the events outside the frame that had provoked the conflagration. Closer to the present, Shukman described reporting from Ramallah last year: the broad main street, the ritual afternoon exchanges between Palestinian youths and the Israeli army; the after-lunch arrival of four or five international network or agency TV crews. He spoke of feeling personally safe. Both sides, for their own reasons, wanted the event recorded and shown to the world. Yet, he felt frustrated that he could not show either all that he could see or "all of the story".

Likewise, in East Timor in late 1999, he became frustrated with the Australian commanders of the UN Intervention Force (INTERFET) who:

*could only see, in a sort of military staff college sense, that it was crazy in a big dangerous mission in a hazardous environment to have journalists and TV crews (and all their gear and fuel, when they could have) guys with guns*

(Shukman, 2000)

By contrast, he had complete confidence in the officers commanding the British component of INTERFET.

*They had all been through Northern Ireland, the Gulf, elements of Yugoslavia. They knew the importance of the media and made huge efforts to get us in on the ground.*

(Shukman, 2000)

Like Shea, before him, Shukman believes that war and the media depend on each other. And that, they both insist, is a good thing, provided that they can get "good punchy pictures".

### Conversing with Pictures

Eye movement studies show that people perceive large objects more readily than small, bright objects rather than dim, sharp-edged rather than blurred and changing rather than static. We are also disposed to believe that successive frames have something to do with one another - either spatially or causally or both - and that the world continues beyond our frame of view. Camera angles, frame sizes and lighting textures all have culturally determined meanings (Monaco, 2000).

Thus, visual imagery, no less than speech, has its own rhetoric. We can construct visual stories, be they factual, fictional or fantastic, as we can those that are spoken or written. And we can argue with, as well as about, pictures. We can learn to interrogate as well as to interpret them.

The vital element of conversation for Dewey, as I understand him, was not the spoken reply but the reflected and thoughtful reply. Viewing and reading can become as active and as conversational as listening. What is essential is that the capacity to produce one's own visual version of events and issues should be universally available. We are well aware that my "terrorist" may well be your "freedom fighter", and that "gunman" has all sorts of criminal connotations in many societies. A former Australian prime minister, once described his Malaysian counterpart Dr Mahathir as "recalcitrant", and caused a diplomatic incident the two countries. Had he said "stubborn", Dr Mahathir might have been less offended, if not quite pleased. In recent weeks in Australia, a small group of people rescued from a sinking boat in the Indian Ocean have been described variously as "boatpeople", "asylum-seekers", "illegals" and "refugees"; a Norwegian sea-captain has been either a humane hero or a defiant villain; and so on.

Similar problems arise with pictures. Television pictures of M. Camdessus, the head of the IMF, folding his arms and looking over President Suharto's shoulder as he signed a financial agreement, largely fuelled Indonesian indignation at Western intervention in the financial crisis of 1998 and weakened the power of the New Order government in the eyes of the public.

Stable pictures, taken on a tripod, declare the permission and complicity of their subjects much more than unstable, handheld shots. Low angle pictures show greater respect than high angle shots. Rim-lit silhouettes in a dark frame connote mystery and danger, in news as they do in fiction. Pictures shot surreptitiously

from moving vehicles, or handheld by running camera people, evoke a sensation of urgency and drama.

### Conclusion

These are examples of the techniques that contribute to the construction of "reality" in television news. They are part of what Lippmann described as the "nature of news and news gathering". They contribute to his observation that, if there is a problem with news, it is not one the tyrannical state or imperfect markets but the nature of news, the psychology of the audience and the scale of modern life (Carey, 1989:76). All of which, as you will see in the video (Morgan, 2001), we can learn to deal with.

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